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Contributors: Erin Brock.
Summary:

This resource discusses nominalizations and subject position as they relate to sentence clarity.

Sentence Clarity: Nominalizations and Subject Position

This resource will help students understand what nominalizations are, as well as how and when they should be used in sentences.

Nominalizations are nouns that are created from adjectives (words that describe nouns) or verbs (action words). For example, “interference” is a nominalization of “interfere,” “decision” is a nominalization of “decide,” and “argument” is a nominalization of “argue.”

Below are some of the more common nominalizations (on the left) and their original forms (on the right):

Nouns	**Verbs**
Intention	Intend
Intervention	Intervene
Distortion	Distort
Evolution	Evolve
Interference	Interfere
Discrimination	Discriminate
Decision	Decide
Assumption	Assume

Collection	Collect
Investigation	Investigate
Expansion	Expand
Disagreement	Disagree
Discussion	Discuss
Argument	Argue
Failure	Fail

Nouns	**Adjectives**
Applicability	Applicable
Carelessness	Careless
Difficulty	Difficult
Intensity	Intense
Shiftiness	Shifty
Happiness	Happy
Slowness	Slow
Fear	Afraid
Elder	Elderly

As you can see, the endings of the nominalized forms vary, but many end in "-ion/tion", "-ment," "-ity/–ty", and "-ness."

So, why does this matter?

First, it is important to understand what these words mean when you see them. Second, if you are aware of what nominalizations are, you may use them to make your writing easier to understand.

Remember, the two most basic units of a sentence are the **subject** and the **verb.**

Subject → Verb

Character → Action

Person or Thing → Doing Something

Sentences often start with a subject followed by a verb, and are easily understood according to this order. For example,

*Many **children** → **experience** worries when they go to school for the first time.*

***Elephants** → **argue** over small concerns, just like humans.*

The sentences above are very clear, but you might see some with nominalizations, like the ones below:

*The **experience** of children with respect to being at school for the first time is common.*

***Arguments** over small concerns are something elephants have, as well as humans.*

This second set of sentences is more difficult to understand because the use of the nominalization means there must be more words in the sentence.

Subject → Verb: easy to follow

Subject → Long strings of nominalizations and other forms → Verb: hard to follow

Here is an example of the difference between the two structures:

The group discussed how to plan the surprise party.

The discussion of the group was about how to surprise the girl with the birthday without her knowing.

Are nominalizations always a bad choice?

No. Sometimes, nominalizations can be useful:

- When the nominalization is familiar to your reader as a character (happiness), it can be treated as a character. Example: *Happiness has many causes and effects.*
- When you are making a general statement that focuses more on the idea than the actual actors in the sentence. Example: *The distribution of the pizzas was fair.*

Be sure to remember that even in a case where a nominalization is appropriate, you should not use them too often in too short of a space.

Student Activities

For additional practice with this concept, please refere to our two sentence clarity quizzes. For quiz 1, click **here**. For quiz 2, click **here**.